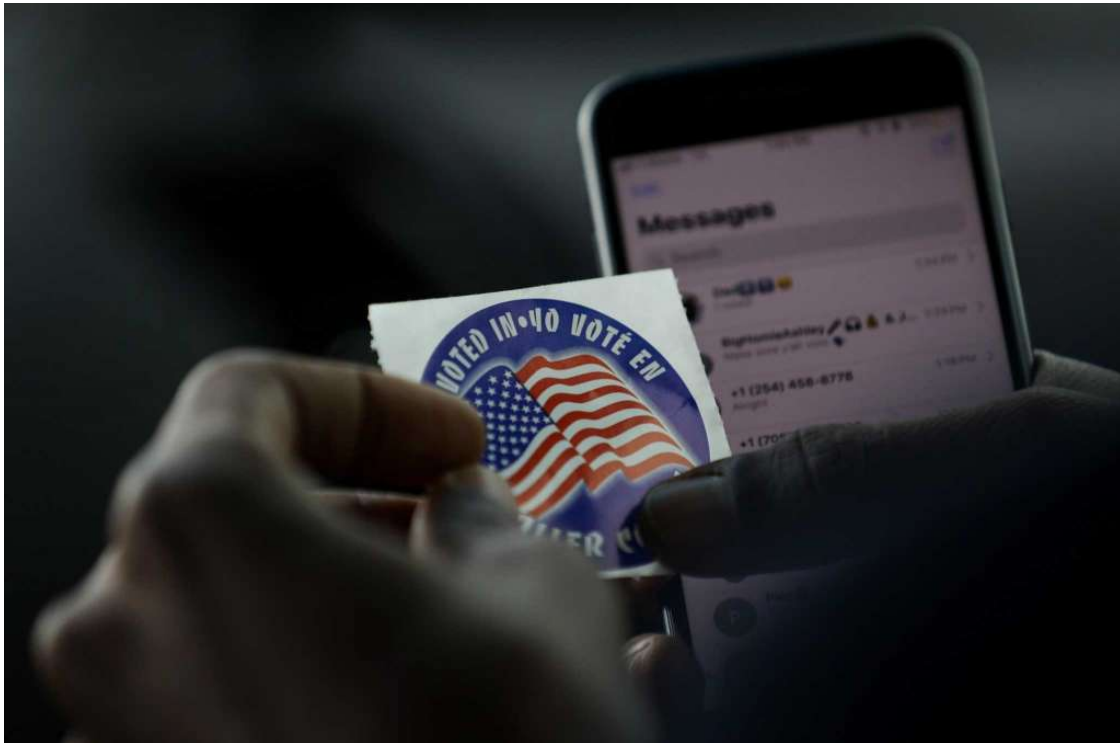


[www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/All-we-want-to-do-is-vote-Prairie-View-A-M-13334253.php](http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/All-we-want-to-do-is-vote-Prairie-View-A-M-13334253.php)

## 'All we want to do is vote': Prairie View A&M students seek on-campus early voting sites during first week

By Jasper Scherer

12-15 minutes



Drew William, a sophomore from Prairie View A&M University, looks at the sticker he received after voting at the Waller County Courthouse during early voting Wednesday, Oct. 24, 2018, in Hempstead. On the ride back to campus, William proudly called his dad and texted friends encouraging them to vote.

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Photo: Jon Shapley, Staff Photographer / Staff Photographer



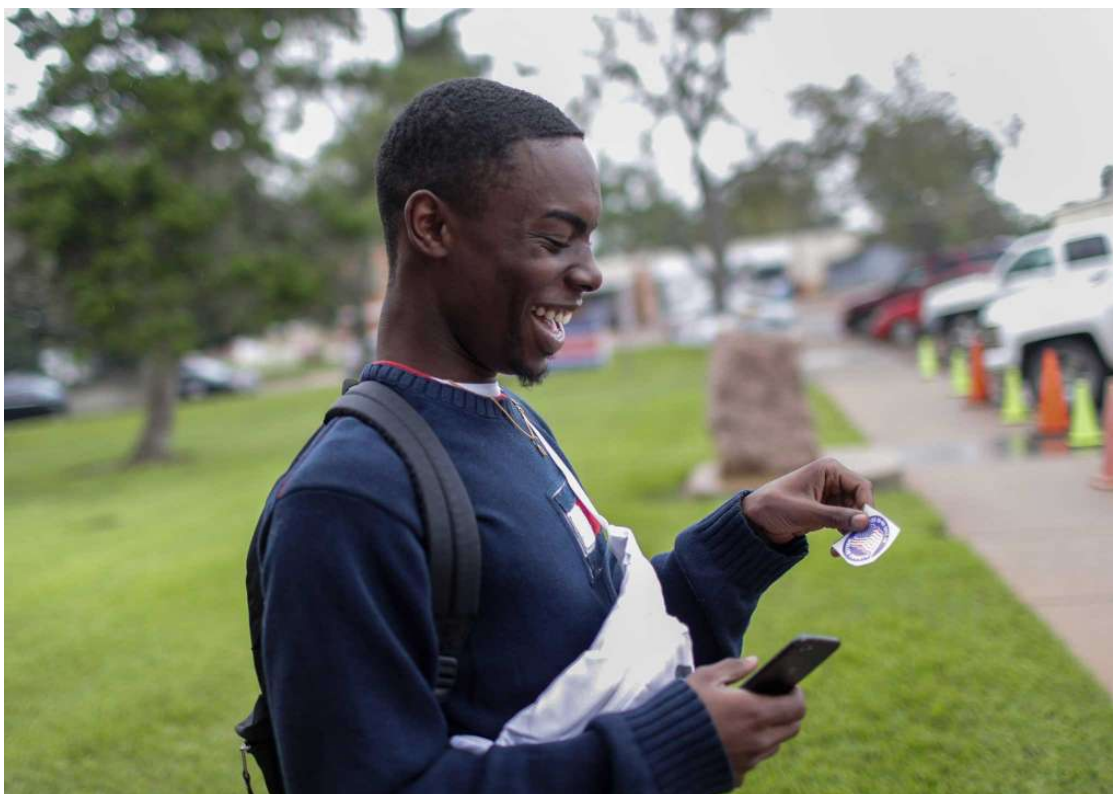
Charlene Shafer, second from right, offers to give Daniel Hebert, right, a ride to off-campus voting locations during early voting, at Prairie View A&M University, Wednesday, Oct. 24, 2018, in Prairie View. "It struck me as another injustice," Shafer said.

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Charlene Shafer, second from right, offers to give Daniel Hebert, right, a ride to off-campus voting locations during early voting, at Prairie View A&M University, Wednesday, Oct. 24, 2018, in Prairie View.

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Drew William, a 22-year-old sophomore at Prairie View A&M University, smiles after voting at the Waller County Courthouse, during early voting Wednesday, Oct. 24, 2018, in Hempstead.

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Photo: Jon Shapley, Staff Photographer / Staff Photographer

A coalition of campaign staffers, student groups and local residents are driving Prairie View A&M University students to local polling locations, an effort they say is necessary because Waller County is not operating early voting locations on campus until next week.

The absence of polling sites has prompted [a federal lawsuit](#) filed Monday in Houston by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. The suit, brought on behalf of five Prairie View A&M students, contends the county is violating the civil rights of the university's 8,400 students, 82 percent of whom are black.

County officials, including some listed as defendants in the suit, have said the polling locations were approved in September with input from the county's Democratic and Republican Party chairs, with an eye on avoiding the school's homecoming festivities this week.

"We had the locations and the times. There was no discussion, there was nobody that showed up. Nobody gave any comment at all," County Judge Trey Duhon said at an Oct. 17 Commissioners Court meeting.

Duhon, in a joint statement with Elections Administrator Christy Eason, on Wednesday said the county had complied with the law and vigorously denied the lawsuit's "false allegations" of voter disenfranchisement. Duhon and Eason said they were surprised by the lawsuit.

"The current Court has a record of actively engaging with the Prairie View A&M Community and its students, including placing a polling location for students on campus, and did so prior to any threat of federal intervention," the statement reads.

In the meantime, the campaigns of Rep. Beto O'Rourke and Mike Siegel, the Democratic nominees for U.S. Senate and the 10th Congressional District, are collaborating with a handful of student groups on an effort to drive students to the polls. By Wednesday afternoon, 28 drivers had signed up, with about 15 taking part so far to drive students to vote in Hempstead, according to Jacob Aronowitz, a field director for Siegel.

Local residents are stepping in, too. Charlene Shafer, a 72-year-old retired teacher in Cypress, became interested after she found out Aronowitz was [arrested](#) at the Waller County Courthouse Oct. 10. The incident came as Aronowitz delivered a letter demanding the county update the registration status of Prairie View A&M students whose registrations were thrown into question over problems with their addresses. He did not receive charges over the incident.

"I just know that Prairie View has quite a history of suppression aimed at Prairie View A&M," Shafer said. The county has been repeatedly accused of disenfranchising African-American residents and Prairie View students, including in a 1979 case that reached the U.S. Supreme Court, though officials — including Duhon — insist they are not aiming to suppress any votes.

At the Oct. 17 meeting, the court voted 3-2 to dismiss a proposal from students to add additional polling sites on campus this week, despite a recommendation to do so from the county's elections administrator, Christy Eason.

"When you look at the schedule, there is not equal representation there," Eason told commissioners. She said residents of the city of Prairie View also should receive the opportunity to vote in their hometown this week, in addition to students.

The county is operating voting locations this week in the cities of Brookshire, Hempstead, Katy and Waller, with the closest locations about a 10 minute drive from campus.

The defendants listed in the suit are Duhon, Eason, Waller County and the Commissioners Court. The five students who put forward the lawsuit were Jayla Allen, Damon Johnson, Joshua Muhammad, Raul Sanchez and Treasure Smith.

"All we want to do is vote. We don't want to play the party politics, we're not trying to sue the county every year," said Prairie View A&M student Kirsten Budwine, a member of the student government association who has sought more voting opportunities on campus. "We just want to vote, and we want access to voting, just like Texas A&M at College Station has, just like UT Austin has. Why is it that ... we go through this every single year?"

Siegel said the Commissioners Court's reasoning for dismissing the students' request was "disingenuous." He noted that the county operated some polling sites during the first week of early voting in areas with fewer voters than the campus. "The county continues to leave students short, to deprive students of the equal opportunity to vote. That's very concerning to me," he said.

Though students must cast their ballots elsewhere this week, they will have the option to vote on campus Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday next week at the university's Memorial Student Center. Polls will open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Otherwise, the county is operating a voting site at a nearby community center Nov. 1 and 2, the last two days of early voting.

The federal lawsuit marks only the latest development in a series of issues over the voting rights of students at Prairie View A&M. On Oct. 9, the final day to register to vote in the midterm elections, [some students discovered](#) they could have registered to vote under the wrong address, a complication that stems from a quirk in how students receive their mail.

Though the county initially said students would have to fill out additional paperwork at the polls to correct the issue — creating an [uproar among local Democrats](#) who claimed the requirement would discourage turnout — the Texas secretary of state [issued a joint statement](#) with the county, local parties and Siegel saying students would not have to fill out the paperwork after all.

Officials say the backlash to the string of incidents is overblown and they have not sought to prevent Prairie View A&M students from voting. Eason issued a statement saying “there was never any ill intent behind the error whatsoever” after the secretary of state clarified the registration issue.

However, the county’s ugly history of voting issues — which predates the elected officials involved in the current matter — has raised alarm and drawn the attention of officials including Rep. Al Green, D-Houston, who in a letter asked Attorney General Jeff Session to investigate the registration issue.

In the 1979 Supreme Court case, Prairie View students secured the right to vote on the college campus without filling out a residency questionnaire. Thirteen years later, a grand jury indicted 14 students on voting fraud charges that were later dropped, but prompted student marches.

Meanwhile, college students in Harris County are facing voting issues of their own. The county does not have an early voting location on any of its big college campuses like Rice University or the University of Houston.

Harris County Clerk Stan Stanart said many factors go into choosing an early voting location, with the biggest consideration being the availability of enough parking. Early voting locations also have to be available for a full 12 days, he said, and not every place can provide that.

*[jasper.scherer@chron.com](mailto:jasper.scherer@chron.com)*

*[twitter.com/jaspscherer](https://twitter.com/jaspscherer)*

*Data Editor Matt Dempsey and reporter Kaylee Dusang contributed to this story.*